

*LOCAL HISTORY: MIRROR OF AMERICA**

by Roger C. Storms

Writing the history of a town is a rewarding experience for a teacher accustomed to the study of the larger trends in American history and disturbing to anyone who likes simple, pat answers from a textbook. People do not always conduct themselves in the manner the textbook suggests they should. All sorts of personality conflicts, geographic considerations, and social and economic forces create a multiplicity of local issues which color political and ideological judgments. Two towns, side-by-side, identical in social and economic outlook, may vote for opposing political parties. Their ideologies are alike, but local and sectional rivalries may drive them toward opposing political affiliations. Two towns in entirely different regions may vote for the same political party for opposite reasons, or for opposite political parties for the same reason. This irrational pattern of American political behavior can be explained only by a complex variety of local circumstances. Localism has been an immensely important force in American political life. Yet, localism has been largely ignored in the teaching of American history.

It is very simple to say that a vote for Andrew Jackson in 1832 was dictated by a certain set of economic interests or ideological beliefs. It is easy and reassuring to say that a vote for William Howard Taft in 1912 represents a textbook example of a particular attitude. The study of local history will often contradict such generalizations and reveal a rather chaotic complexity of crosscurrents and conflicting motives.

I first really became aware of this in writing a history of my ancestral town - Parkman, Maine. My study began after the customary extensive grounding in American history in undergraduate and graduate level courses. Much to my surprise, I discovered that the textbook generalizations, which I had hoped would serve as a framework for the study, were not an adequate preparation. For instance, I found that a petty quarrel over the seating arrangements of the choir in a Baptist church could be a stronger factor than conflicting political ideologies in determining who voted for Abraham Lincoln or Stephen Douglas or even John C. Breckenridge for President. Again and again, my study of the town's history brought to light important local factors which appeared to contradict the generalizations I had been taught.

Some will argue that this kind of local historical

interpretation would be utterly incomprehensible to the student. But I do believe that the study of localism reveals a more realistic picture, and, if truth is what we are after, should be pursued diligently. Students need not study every local situation, but it is important that they see our country's history in terms of their local setting. Local illustrations can be used to reenforce national developments, while they at the same time remind us as well as our students that history is not simplistic.

Having discovered for myself the importance of localism, I wished to find some way to apply it to the area in which I was teaching. Ours is a private school (Lee Academy) serving in the place of a public high school for a scattered rural population in northeastern Maine. I suggested to my superiors at the Academy that I be hired for a summer to work on a local-history project. Much to my surprise, my proposal was accepted.

Last summer (1969), I collected all the pertinent information I could from town and church records, legislative acts and court cases pertaining to the region. These were arranged in a series of readings. To date, we have developed thirteen lessons - all mimeographed or otherwise duplicated. Several other lessons will be developed later as time permits. The purpose is not to replace traditional instruction in American history but to provide a local supplement relating to one or more general developments in our country's annals. Based on our experience, here are some of the topics we suggested interested teachers can develop from sources in their own localities:

EARLY VISITORS. Try to find descriptions of your own region before it was fully settled. For my area, I was able to find such descriptions in the writings of John James Audubon, Henry David Thoreau, and Alexander Baring (later Lord Ashburton).

LAND DEVELOPERS. An important part of frontier development was speculation in land. Search out the early developers in your area to see what problems they encountered. One fascinating discovery for us was the constant conflict between settlers and land speculators. Land developers collected their payments in commodities, credited the settlers with the wholesale price and then sold the goods at retail prices on the open market, thus adding to their profits. Conflicts often arose with the settlers over the actual value of the commodities and the amounts credited as payments for land.

One such conflict in my area arose between Williams College and the settlers of the town of Lee, which had been granted to the college just before Massachusetts had

relinquished control of Maine. State courts upheld Williams College, but the Lee settlers carried their case to the United States Supreme Court. The latter ruled in their favor, thus overturning the state decision. We were able to use the controversy and its denouement to reenforce textbook examples of John Marshall's decisions strengthening federal powers.

Land development in our area can also be tied in with the economic dislocations caused by the American Revolution. Many prominent men sought new business opportunities to replace the trade and subsidies formerly derived from England. Typical of this new generation was William Bingham, a prominent Philadelphia merchant who endeavored to adjust to changing times through land development. Bingham owned lands on the New York frontier (Binghamton, New York) and also purchased two million acres in Maine. Several townships in our area belonged to him. Lord Ashburton was his son-in-law and thus had a special interest in settling the Maine boundary dispute with England (Webster-Ashburton Treaty).

Another area that can be explored fruitfully with students is the effect of warfare on movement to the frontiers. Although Maine was hardly settled prior to the American Revolution, there are nearly 1,700 Revolutionary War veterans, the third highest number in the country, buried there. Their graves can be found throughout Maine frontier towns. My area has several, as well as many for veterans of the War of 1812. Service records have been obtained on several of these individuals and my students always find them interesting.

EARLY GROWING PAINS. The rivalry over the location of the county seat was a perennial issue almost everywhere. The use of public lands for various projects was another. Legislative records tell a good deal about transportation problems since steamboat franchises and canal companies were often created by legislative acts. These can be used to reenforce the textbook accounts of Robert Fulton and the Erie Canal.

SOCIAL LIFE. In nearly all localities, there are many sources for social history which help give students a sharper flavor of the past. Social taboos discovered in church, school and town records are particularly amusing to students, as are the problems raised by pound-keepers and sheep brands. Old newspapers can be utilized to describe the events at town fairs and Fourth of July celebrations.

Town and church records are particularly helpful in giving a vivid picture of how the poor and the insane were cared for. Students can also in this way get some idea of the mobility of frontier people. Towns often sued one another over the care of some pauper who had moved into the region. Such cases were

frequently complicated by the fact that people tended to move so often. Tracing the movement of such a frontier family can be fascinating.

CIVIL WAR. A wealth of statistical data are available on the towns of this area, particularly from the state adjutant generals' reports. I went through these reports and compiled a list of all the men whom I could find from my area serving in the Civil War. Their names were then arranged by town and alphabetical order. In general, I could obtain age, marital status, regiment and company, dates of mustering in and out, promotions, sicknesses, wounds and deaths. I also compiled a list of battles and campaigns in which each area regiment participated. In this way, students can trace the history of specific men throughout the war. Studies of poor-relief costs and skyrocketing state taxes demonstrate how the Civil War put the skids under rural Maine and led to the exodus to the Far West.

The Civil War created a whole new set of problems for local welfare programs. State records illustrate the new burden on towns resulting from the need to care for the dependents of soldiers in the field. State records were also kept on contributions made to various war needs such as hospitals or the chaplaincy. A list of statistics for a particular town can give a graphic picture of what the war entailed. A study of taxes before, during, and after the Civil War can also be helpful. I was fortunate in finding a record book of a local Grand Army of the Republic lodge. This provided a look at social life after the war, as well as G.A.R. relief programs.

WESTWARD MOVEMENT. Newspapers, family genealogies and local histories can supply a long list of persons going West after the Civil War. From them, you can find out the kind of enterprises in which they had been engaged. Sometimes you can find enough to make short biographies of representative people who went West.

INDUSTRIALIZATION. The best source for post-Civil War industrial development is legislative records. These provide a long list of businesses incorporated by legislative acts. When the textbook tells about Western railroads, this is a good time to look at the realities of railroading in your own area. You will find state subsidies and land grants paralleling the federal grants for the West. The development of water, power and telephone companies can also be brought in, since most of them were local endeavors. In my area, log driving companies and sluices were particularly important.

FARMER UNREST. In my area, the Greenback movement was a

dominant political force in its time. This afforded an opportunity to compare militant farmers of the Greenback and Populist periods. Although James B. Weaver was the standard-bearer of both movements, the Populists received very little support in our area. Militant farmers can also be studied through the Grange. I was fortunate in having available the records of a very early local Grange which is still in existence. Its records go back to 1875, the very heart of the Greenback era. Students can thus study farmer unrest at close hand.

Sources similar to those listed above can be used to gauge the impact of World War I and to glimpse life in the 1920's. Beyond that, paradoxically, the task becomes somewhat more difficult. Newspapers are the best starting point. I have been able to compile a good list of World War I veterans from my area. But resources for doing the same for World War II or the Korean War are virtually non-existent.

These supplementary lessons in local history have been enthusiastically received by most of my students. The interest is there because we are dealing with local, familiar surroundings. Some, however, remain tied to the textbook. It is easy for them to say that local history is not important, just as many historians have done. But in my experience local history has been a fascinating mirror of America.

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